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THE SECRETARY OF STATE

"AGENT OF COORDINATION"

by

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STATEMENT PREPARED FOR
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In the era of the atom, the missile, and alliances a President must from time to time take personal command of critical national security operations. When he does, the problem of coordination is minimized, for the achievement of consistency or congruency in action depends on a common understanding among those directing national security operations of what is to be done and faithful execution. If the President is calling the signals, his words are, of course, final, and he has a unique claim to the loyalty of his department and agency chiefs. This is not true of anyone short of the President.

A President can give his personal attention, however, to only a small fraction of national security matters requiring coordinated decisions and actions by the several departments and agencies making up the national security team. Means other than presidential quarterbacking must be found for the rest.

It was to meet this situation that the Operations Coordinating Board was created in 1953. Experience with the Board was not wholly satisfactory, even in the view of some high officials of the Eisenhower Administration. In 1960 the Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery studied the problem, and in its report, The Secretary of State and the National Security Policy Process, found that:

The magnitude and persistence of these difficulties [of coordinating interdepartmental operations] have led many people to believe that the remedy lies in some radical organizational change -- a grand council of "wise men," a new cold war strategy board, a "super-Cabinet" First Secretary, or a "superstaff" agency in the White House....But such novel additions to the policy process, far from reducing the President's burdens, would in all likelihood increase them....

The President's best hope lies along another path -- strengthening the traditional means of executive power. (Organizing for National Security; Staff Reports and Recommendations, Volume 3, p. 48)

The incoming Kennedy Administration shared these views, and decided to rely mainly on the Secretary of State to perform the coordinating task. The OCB was abolished in 1961 and steps were taken to strengthen the position of the Secretary of State and his department. Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, explained these moves in a letter of September 4, 1961 to Senator Henry M. Jackson:

...[The Board's] most serious weakness, for the new administration, was simply that neither the President himself nor the present administration as a whole conceives of operational coordination as a task for a large committee in which no one man has authority. It was and is our belief that there is much to be done that the OCB could not do, and that the things it did do can be done as well or better in other ways.

The most important of these other ways is an increased reliance on the leadership of the Department of State. It would not be appropriate for me to describe in detail the changes which the Department of State has begun to execute in meeting the large responsibilities which fall to it under this concept of administration. It is enough if I say that the President has made it very clear that he does not want a large separate organization between him and his Secretary of State. Neither does he wish any question to arise as to the clear authority and responsibility of the Secretary of State, not only in his own Department, and not only in such large-scale related areas as foreign aid and information policy, but also as the agent of coordination in all our major policies toward other nations. (*Organizing for National Security, Hearings, Volume 1, pp. 1337-8; italics added*)

Difficulties have arisen with this concept of administration and there are doubts even within the Administration whether State will succeed where OCB did not. As Professor Richard E. Neustadt told the present Subcommittee on March 25, 1963:

So far as I can judge, the State Department has not yet found means to take the proffered role and play it vigorously across-the-board of national security affairs.

It is the purpose of this memorandum to consider ways in which a Secretary of State and his department might be helped to perform the coordinating role.

The President and the Secretary of State

A President is, and must be, free to pull any matter out of the normal decision-action process and to take personal command of operations. He is almost certain to do this in any war-peace crisis, like the Cuban crisis of October 1962, or in any major crisis of the alliance, like the negotiations with the British Government following the U.S. decision to cancel Skybolt.

He must also be free to delegate responsibility for the direction of particular operations to others, not always his Secretary of State. For example, the task of pulling together the Administration's trade program was entrusted to a banker, Mr. Howard C. Petersen, who joined the White House staff temporarily for this special assignment. The ability of such an agent to perform the coordinating role, like the ability of anyone except the President himself, depends on the President's backing and on his own powers of persuasion, and he will have to seek presidential resolution of those issues on which he cannot obtain agreement.

The present Administration desires the Secretary of State to serve as the President's agent of coordination on other matters. Like a President, a Secretary is free to lift matters out of routine channels and to give them his personal attention; unlike a President, there will be many issues he cannot resolve on his own authority; and, again like a President, he can give his personal attention to only a small proportion of the matters requiring coordinated interdepartmental decisions and actions.

For the rest -- in volume, the great majority -- a Secretary's responsibilities must be delegated to his principal assistants, the Under and Assistant Secretaries. These men are, of course, responsible to their Secretary and should as a matter of course refer issues to him when his decision and counsel are needed. In the normal course of events, however, their dealings will be largely with their own departments and agencies and with special assistants in the White House.

The Subcommittee's staff report, Administration of National Security: Basic Issues, discusses (pp. 7-8) the kind of relationship which needs to exist between a President and his Secretary of State if a Secretary is to have a "fighting chance" to perform the coordinating role, and it is not necessary to repeat that discussion here. The question is whether there are additional steps which might be taken to help a Secretary and his principal assistants to serve a President as agents of coordination.

Coordination and Action-Forcing Processes

Coordination hinges on processes which force the consideration and approval of actions at a central point. Professor Neustadt has called these "action-forcing processes." The budget provides an excellent example. Adroit use of authority over the budget enables executives in business and government to gain direction and control of their enterprises. Secretary of Defense McNamara's management of the defense establishment has been largely built around the defense budget process. The fact that only a President can submit a budget to Congress forces the departments and agencies of the Executive Branch to obtain presidential approval of proposed programs and thus gives a President his most important instrument for gaining control of the sprawling establishment he heads. It also makes the Bureau of the Budget one of the most important agencies of the Executive Branch.

A key to control and coordination is information. One can not coordinate actions of which he is ignorant. The coordinator must be so placed in the decision-action process that the actions to be coordinated come to his attention. No wholly reliable way of assuring this can be imagined except to require action agencies to obtain his approval.

To say this, however, is to expose at once the difficulty of coordinating national security operations. The volume of business in 33 June 2000 10022-7

Secretary of State and his principal assistants could not approve every important decision if they tried, and it would be folly for them to try. Substantial delegation of responsibility would be necessary. But much of the business -- especially intelligence and clandestine operations -- is so sensitive that access to information must be severely limited. Furthermore, speed is often essential, and action can not always be delayed for review by a central authority.

It seems to follow that a system of checkpoints of some kind is needed to alert the White House and the Secretary of State and his principal assistants when a particular action is or may be inconsistent with American policy and thus to permit corrective measures to be taken if necessary.

Before considering what this system might be, however, it is necessary to say a few words about the responsibility of the individual action-officer for coordination.

Individual Responsibility for Coordination

A great deal of the responsibility for coordination must be left to individual action-officers. Otherwise the task becomes hopeless.

But with what are action-officers to coordinate their actions? In very large part the answer must be: with official policy statements and pronouncements by the President, supplemented in some cases by official statements by the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and perhaps a few other top officials for specific issues.

The importance of close attention to a President's public statements was stressed by Mr. W. Averell Harriman in his appearance before the Subcommittee on March 22, 1963:

The work of the Cabinet, the National Security Council, and other groups at which he [the President] is present, are but one mode of communication between the President and those who operate the machinery of Government. His public statements are often as much directed to Government employees as to the American public.

Officers at every level would do well, I believe, to recognize this characteristic of our American democratic process. Failure to listen, or inability to understand the nuances and purpose of his public statements impede the conduct of government business, and cooperation between the agencies of Government.

Every action-officer should be aware that he is personally responsible, and will be held personally accountable, for coordinating his operations with official policy statements (both public and restricted) by the President and other top spokesmen and of course with approved policy papers. This responsibility should include the obligation to seek clarification when official guidance is unclear or ambiguous.

If an officer is to be held accountable in this way, however, he needs to have available to him an official compilation of the policy guidance he is to follow. He should not have to rely on the uncertain coverage of the press, the services of USIA, and so forth, to keep informed on public statements and he should have in usable form such other material as is relevant to his work. One step that might be considered as a means of improving coordination would be to assign to the Secretary of State or to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs the preparation and distribution of such a compilation.

Another step that might be taken is to direct that important weight be given in rating performance to evidence that an officer has acted intelligently and responsibly in coordinating his operations with official guidance, in seeking clarification when needed, and in keeping other officials adequately informed about his operations. Obviously this should extend to officers in all departments and agencies concerned.

Delegation of Coordinating Responsibility

Apart from and in addition to such a general understanding throughout government about individual responsibility for coordination, specific coordinating responsibilities will have to be lodged with a few key officials -- who occupy checkpoints of the sort mentioned earlier. Overseas the list includes, first of all, Ambassadors and, secondly, the members of the country team. In Washington the best available checkpoints appear to be at the second level in the Department of State -- the Under Secretary for Political Affairs and the Assistant Secretaries.

The Ambassador and the Country Team

President Kennedy's letter of May 29, 1961 to all American Ambassadors clearly assigns major responsibility for coordinating all activities of the United States Government within a country to the Ambassador, with the exception of operations by American military forces operating in the field when "such forces are under the command of a U.S. area military commander." Even in such cases, however, the Ambassador and the military commander are expected to keep each other fully informed and the Ambassador is expected to work out with the commander or to raise with higher authority any matter involving military operations that might, in the Ambassador's judgment, "adversely affect our overall relations" with the country.

The responsibility is therefore clear. But do our Ambassadors fully recognize it and have the information they need to meet it? On its study trip, the Subcommittee's staff tried to look into these questions. On the whole it was favorably impressed, but it appeared that in some instances an Ambassador did not fully accept the responsibility as a positive obligation, extending to all operations by all United States agencies operating in the country, and that Ambassadors were not always fully informed about all operations. From time to

time the result has been that agencies have acted at cross purposes in some countries.

As stated in the staff report:

To a degree the primacy of the ambassador is a polite fiction, especially where budgetary and programming decisions are concerned. Most elements of the country team do not, in other words, regard themselves as parts of the ambassador's staff -- rather they look outside the country, to intermediate headquarters or Washington, for guidance and support and their loyalties tend to run in the same direction.

If a Secretary of State is to serve as a President's "agent of coordination," perhaps the time has come to place the Ambassador (who receives his instructions either from the President or from the Secretary of State) in the center of the decision-action process in fact as well as in theory. The way to accomplish this would be to make all proposals to Washington, or requests addressed to Washington, his proposals and requests (in the same sense in which the budget submitted to Congress is the President's budget) and to direct all instructions to the mission to the Ambassador, with action responsibility to be assigned by him. (The case of an area military commander would remain a special one.)

If an Ambassador's primacy is to be more than a "polite fiction," more than pro forma approval of all operations is the means to make it a reality. And if he is to give more than pro forma approval, he must be staffed to perform his role. That is, he must have an officer or officers on his personal staff, responsible to him, to review the actions of the United States agencies operating in the country and to do the staff work to prepare matters for his consideration.

Some Ambassadors have made good use of the staff resources they have to move far in this direction. Some have managed to achieve genuine ascendancy in the Embassy as a whole. Others have not.

With operations as complex as the totality of American national security operations, one must search for key checkpoints if coordination is to be achieved. What is clear is that the Ambassador's office is one such convenient point, through which incoming and outgoing messages either do pass or could be made to pass. If we are serious about employing a Secretary of State and his department to achieve coordination, one step that can be taken is to see to it that the Ambassador's office becomes such a checkpoint and that it is staffed for the job.

The Under Secretary for Political Affairs and the Assistant Secretaries of State

As one looks around Washington for comparable checkpoints, one is driven to the conclusion that a major role should be played by the Assistant Secretaries of State. These men, alone among officers of their rank, have a responsibility for keeping their eyes on the totality of American relations with the countries in their areas and on the consistency of country or regional policies with our national security policies as a whole.

This group, however, needs someone to whom to report -- someone short of the Secretary and his alter ego, the Under Secretary, if only because these two men will often not be available. It is apparently intended that the Under Secretary for Political Affairs -- the "third man" in the Department -- will provide the needed focal point for the Assistant Secretaries.

If an Assistant Secretary is to be delegated part of the Secretary's task as presidential "agent of coordination," he must be at the center of the decision-action process in Washington. In short, he should review ongoing and proposed operations in his area of responsibility for their consistency with American policy.

The point is clear enough in principle. How can it be carried out in practice?

Part of the answer must lie with the Under Secretary for Political Affairs and the Assistant Secretaries -- and the support they receive from a President and his Secretary of State. The Assistant Secretaries should be men of such ability and stature that they can establish their ascendancy in matters within their spheres of interest and responsibility. Furthermore, they should be -- in the best sense -- the President's and the Secretary's men, owing their loyalty to them. If chosen from the career service, they should place their loyalty to the President and the Secretary above loyalty to the service and perhaps should sever their connections to the service. For it is through such men that a President and his Cabinet members must work if the bureaucracy is to serve them, not the other way around.

To the extent that the Assistant Secretaries establish their ascendancy, have the confidence and receive the backing of a President and Secretary of State, and become men whose support is as valuable as their opposition is formidable, officers of other departments and agencies will increasingly turn to them for guidance when difficult questions arise. The Assistant Secretaries should deliberately cultivate the kind of close, intimate relationships with their opposite numbers in the Department of Defense and other national security agencies on which a common understanding of policy can be built.

Part of the answer must also lie with their opposite numbers. They should be made to understand that they have a responsibility to coordinate their operations with the operations of the rest of the government, that they will be held accountable for it, and that in the normal course of events the central source of guidance is the appropriate Assistant Secretary of State.

However, although much improvement might be obtained in these ways, the problem of coordination probably can not be safely left to these relationships.

Even with good will all around, the volume of business is so heavy, the need for secrecy so great, and the importance of swift action so compelling that the kind of checking needed to assure coordination will sometimes be neglected.

With this in mind, an organizational innovation in the Executive Office of the President is proposed below.

An Office of National Security Communications

Access to information depends on access to the communications by which messages are transmitted. Action-officers have to be instructed and to make reports to higher authorities, and these messages are transmitted by a communications system of some kind.

Each national security department and agency and each of the military services has a more or less independent communications system to serve its needs and each attaches much importance to the possession of its own lines of communication. To have access to information is to have power. (Some consolidation of communications is taking place in the Department of Defense with the establishment of the Defense Communications Agency. One consequence, it may safely be predicted, will be to increase the power of the Secretary vis-a-vis the military departments and services.)

In order to safeguard the President's interests, a message center has been created in the White House, which is designed to keep the President promptly and fully informed about matters of concern to him. This enhances the President's ability to intervene when he believes it necessary, and thus increases his ability to direct national security operations.

If the Secretary of State and his principal assistants are to perform a key coordinating role, they need similar access to the flow of messages bearing on national security.

A small, central Office of National Security Communications, located in the Executive Office of the President, might serve both the needs of the President and the Secretary of State as the President's agent of coordination. As things stand, a Secretary of State may not hear of important developments until some time after a number of other key officials have been informed. This situation is inconsistent with the assignment of coordinating responsibilities to the Secretary of State. If the functions of the Office were limited to those usually associated with the concept of an executive secretariat, the dangers of a "superstaff agency," which were pointed out by the Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery, should be avoided.

Taking the government as a whole, the physical means of communication with many parts of the world are unsatisfactory and fail to provide the reliable, secure, rapid communications needed in the sixties and beyond. It is increasingly recognized that the risks we run by failing to provide the best possible communications system far outweigh the costs of modern facilities.

A President obviously has great interest in this matter. One task of an Office of National Security Communications might be to take the leadership in planning and developing a rational system of communications, one meeting both the needs of the President and the needs of the departments and agencies. A second task might be to take responsibility for assuring that messages of interest to the President, the Secretary of State as his agent of coordination, and other key officials in the national security area, are received by the Office for prompt referral to them.

The precise organization of the Office and definition of its functions need to be carefully considered for the President, perhaps by the Bureau of the Budget or a special presidential commission. Such questions as these need to be raised:

Would such a small, central office serve a useful purpose for the President and the Secretary of State?

Should it perform only secretariat functions, such as review of messages to check whether they have appropriate clearances and distribution of messages to the President, the Secretary of State, and other key officials?

Should the office be located in the Executive Office of the President but placed under an officer responsible to the Secretary of State, as well as the President, perhaps the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, in order to emphasize the Secretary's responsibility as the President's agent of coordination?

Would it be possible to staff the office with officers having a keen "policy sense" even though the office would not be a source of policy guidance?

Should the primary function of the office be to assure the rapid distribution of messages to the President and the Secretary of State, in accordance with priorities meeting their needs?

To what extent might the office consolidate certain functions now performed elsewhere, and what should its relations be with other communications and message centers?

Such questions need to be considered by someone who is thoroughly familiar with the needs of the President and the Secretary of State and with the needs of the departments and agencies. The proposal is offered as a measure which might help improve coordination, and it should not be acted upon unless careful study suggests that it would.

Conclusion

Coordination is both a function of procedure and process, on the one hand, and of personal relationships among a small group of key officials, on the other. Of the two, the latter are probably by far the most important, for given the proper relationships among the men involved, the men will find or devise ways of keeping each other informed and of resolving their differences so that a unified effort can be made.

Miracles, as Professor Neustadt cautioned, should not be expected from improvements in procedures and processes, for at best they "cannot abolish the deep difficulties of perception, of analysis, of judgment, of persuasion which confront our policy-makers now and in the future."

Nevertheless, the logical implication of making the Secretary of State the President's agent of coordination should be honestly faced: either we find ways of putting him and his principal assistants in Washington and abroad at checkpoints in the decision-action process, or he will be unable to perform the role the President has assigned him.